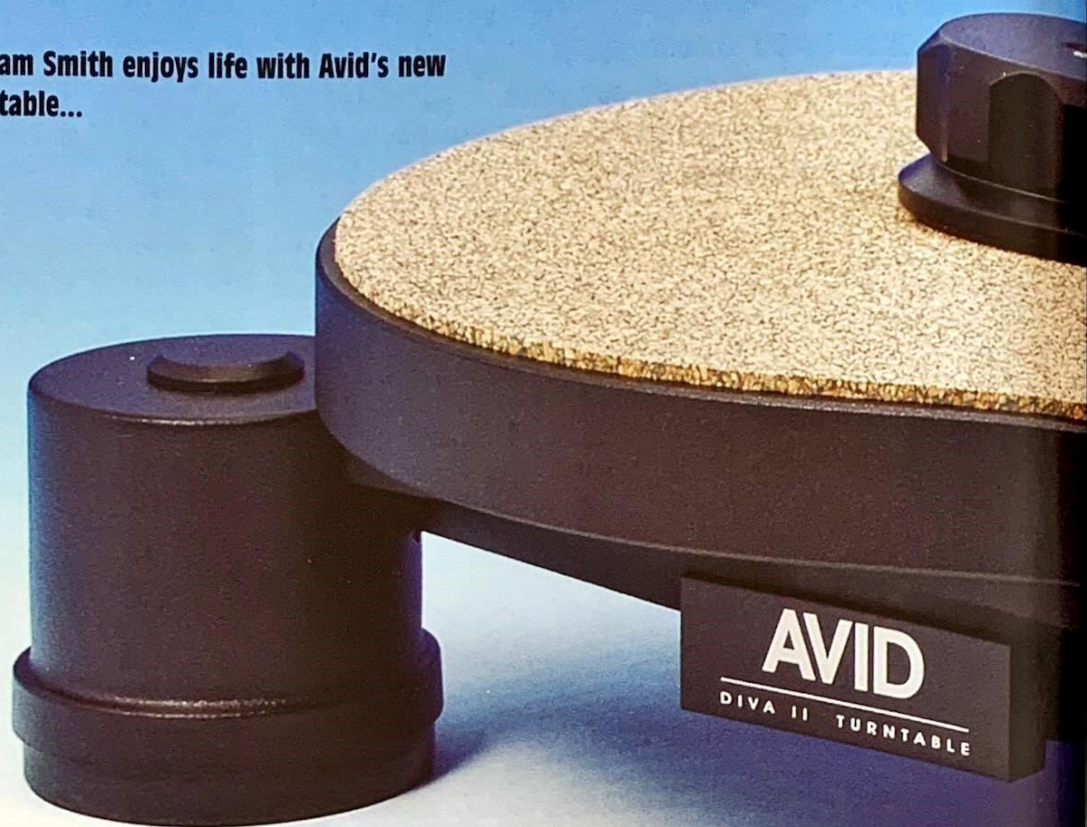


Viva La Diva

Bon viveur Adam Smith enjoys life with Avid's new Diva IISP turntable...



Spurred on by the resurgence of vinyl, it would appear that Avid is a company going places. I had a long and interesting chat with owner Conrad Mas at the Munich Hi-Fi Show and he was telling me of the company's plans for the future, and what they are planning to introduce over the next couple of years. Naturally I am sworn to secrecy but suffice it to say that I nearly fell off my stool when he announced that the number of new products in this period will be in double figures! Interestingly, a teaser has now been posted on Avid's website, and it turns out that the launch for several of these new products will be the September Hi-Fi Show at Whittlebury Hall over the weekend of the 26th and 27th of September. As the full *Hi-Fi World* team will be

in attendance, it remains only to see who ends up banging on the door of the Avid room to grab first glance at the new £18,000 flagship!

I think this is indicative that Avid has become something of a success story since it opened its doors in 1995. Yes, the company also doubles as a source of high quality mechanical engineering, but making perfect 'oily bits' for a turntable is all very well if you don't know how to put them together or how to make them interact successfully. Fortunately, judging by the Diva II, Volvere and Acutus models that we are such fans of, it appears this isn't an issue. Consequently, it was with a great sense of anticipation that I set to unpacking the first newbie from Avid; the Diva II SP turntable...

As its name suggests, this deck is an evolution of the base model Diva II, which incorporates some features found on bigger brother Volvere, but also launches one or two new ideas for Avid onto the market. Obviously visually similar to the Diva II, the first thing you notice when assembling the deck is that the platter is a metal item, rather than the MDF of the standard Diva II, and this spins on a high quality Tungsten carbide/sapphire

bearing assembly taken from the dearer decks. As per all Avid designs, the Diva II SP is belt driven, but it is here that the new item I mentioned earlier shows its face, in the form of a synchronous AC motor, driving the platter through twin belts and offering variable speed through a brand new frequency-adjustable power supply.

This configuration came about as Conrad prefers to stick with a synchronous AC motor. As he explained, he sees the use of a DC type as something of an easy option, requiring a simple voltage alteration for speed adjustment but his concerns at how the changing load on such a motor can ever make it hope to remain stable meant that he stuck with the AC, and chose to develop a circuit that regenerates a clean AC signal to power the motor, making it frequency-adjustable for the possibility of speed alteration. The result is the DSP Vari-SPEED supply, so called because it uses Digital Signal Processing for signal generation and control.

Physically the supply is a small and neat metal box with an on/off knob and two buttons. One starts and stops the platter, and the other





is stored in memory. A simple process and an effective one too, as both speeds remained rock-solid after several days of continuous running.

In physical terms, the Diva II SP is very well built as I would have expected, but the fitting of the twin belts is fiddly. As there is no separate subplatter, Avid provide a pin which is located in a hole under the platter, the belts are fitted around the drive surface and hooked over this, then it is put into position, the belts guided onto the pulley and the pin removed. All very well but clearance under the platter isn't great and when I tried to remove the pin, the belt tension caused it to ping off, ricochet around the back of my rack and vanish into thin air!

SOUND QUALITY

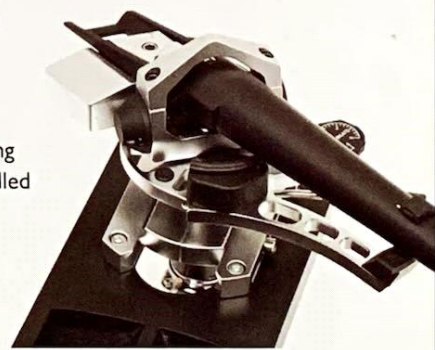
With my Audio Technica AT-OC9MLII fitted, and warming up the Diva II SP and supplied SME 309 arm with something a little frivolous in the form of Kleerup's recent twelve inch single 'Longing for Lullabies', I realised that the Diva II SP does indeed have the Avid family sound,

but definitely takes the performance of the standard Diva II up a gear. The electronic bass line from this track was punchy and deep, offering visceral excitement, and the Diva II SP proved a more than willing accomplice to some dance-related shenanigans. Moving to something a little more sophisticated, it continued to show that it is right at the top of the tree when it comes to bass lines, imbuing Tift Merrit's 'Still Pretending' with a delightfully well formed underpinning. I was aware that some notes were not quite as well separated as I am used to (but that's a Garrard 301 for you...) but generally the Diva II SP carried the underlying tune beautifully and remained solid and confident throughout the track.

Equally delightful was its sense of expressiveness and feeling across the midband. Tift's vocals were vivid and finely etched onto the performance, the Avid making it easy to spot when she pulled back from the microphone when delivering something of a vocal crescendo; some lesser decks simply leave you wondering why



changes the speed, whilst pressing and holding both moves the unit into speed adjustment mode, where one button speeds up in fine increments and the other slows down. Once the desired speed is reached, both buttons are pressed together once more and the setting





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she's gone a bit quiet suddenly, but the Avid didn't miss a trick here. Instruments also held no fear for the deck, and the Ulilean pipes from Brian Kennedy's track 'Captured' were magnificent in both timbre and sonic texture. Once again, a less than capable deck can make these sound rather strained and uncomfortable, but through the Avid they sounded as clear and as lifelike as I could have hoped.

Shifting the musical genre again to Jean Michel Jarre showed that the Diva II SP is also something of a wizard when it comes to timing. Those delicious analogue synthesizers stopped and started perfectly, and the Avid made sure that each and every note sat in its own space and could be easily picked out if one chose to do so, and yet melded with its companions to form a beautifully cohesive and flowing whole. In fact, in imagery terms, I felt that the Diva II SP is one of the best at its price in the way in which it layers performances. That is to say, some decks pull everything out into the room, some push all the action off into the distance, but the Diva II SP has perfected the trick that usually identifies something much more expensive. Which is to say that it positions everything perfectly, lining the main action up at the front, and tucking the backing performances in behind this just where they need to be. Frankly, it's further grist to my theory that, if you want surround sound but don't want a roomful of loudspeakers, try a decent turntable instead [hear, hear! Ed.]

Instrumental detail was another trick up the Diva II SP's sleeve that it unveiled fairly early on in the game. As I replaced the aforementioned Kleerup twelve inch single in my box of 45rpm vinyl delights, I came across another disc that hasn't seen the light of day for a few years. 'Birdman' by Ride is an indie classic that starts with some softly tapped bongos and a delicately strummed bass guitar, which the Avid absolutely lapped up. In fact, the bongo strikes were quite uncannily lifelike in the

corner of my room. The rest of the track is predictably noisier, and the Avid had fun with this, but I did detect a hint of compression starting to creep in on occasion.

A further wander through my records seemed to suggest that, yes, the Diva II SP could sometimes get a little uncomfortable with harder, louder and more congested material, seemingly cowering away from it a little. As this was the first time I had used an SME 309, I did fit my own rewired Alphason HR100S to the deck at a later stage to see if this was causing the issue, but it remained in place, and so is something to look out for when

auditioning. Still, it's worth pointing out that all the best of the rest of its price rivals are similarly afflicted by this to an extent. It's not for nothing that folk spend twice as much money on the likes of the Volvere Sequel...

CONCLUSION

The Avid Diva II SP is a fine turntable and, the doubling of price it commands over the standard Diva II is well worth the extra outlay. The Diva II is certainly an absolute bargain at its £1,000 price point and punches well above its weight sonically, but listening to the Diva II SP, it's easy to pick out the extra sophistication and musical insight that the superior engineering has brought about. Add in a versatile new power supply that will undoubtedly be making its influence felt elsewhere, and you have a very fine vinyl spinner indeed that promises a high standard for the other forthcoming models.



REFERENCE SYSTEM

Garrard 301 turntable
Alphason HR-100S arm (Cardas wired)
Audio Technica AT-OC9MLII cartridge
Anatek MC1 phono stage
Naim Supernait amplifier
Ferrograph S1 loudspeakers

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The SME309 tonearm supplied uses a tapered, cast magnesium tube with detachable magnesium headshell. It is internally damped to suppress vibration, SME say. Our vibration analysis, made with a Bruel & Kjaer accelerometer, shows two well suppressed modal peaks, at 400Hz and 650Hz from the arm in its basic bending mode, something all arms suffer to a greater or lesser extent; usually a greater extent because the 309 puts up a good performance here, with accelerations of 0.1g, although it does not better the Rega RB1000 or one-piece SME V. The detachable headshell may well have some impact, but the 309 is still reasonably clean. There is a large 0.35g peak at 1200Hz but narrow peak containing little energy. There is a cluster of high frequency peaks above 5kHz, a common pattern, but these are also slightly lower than is common. So the 309 puts up a good performance in

terms of arm vibration.

The Avid Diva II SP itself ran at exactly the right speed. An unweighted wow value of around 0.2% (0.22% in our analysis) is a little below the best and this was likely affecting the weighted value which at 0.076% was satisfactorily low, if not quite as low as is possible (0.06%).

So the Avid Diva SP with SME309 tonearm package measured well all round. There are no weaknesses, and both items are very well built. NK

WOW & FLUTTER



VERDICT

A detailed and punchy musical performer, the Diva II SP fills the logical gap between the Diva II and Volvere perfectly.

AVID DIVA II SP £2,000
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FOR

- superb midrange detail
- depth perspective
- taut, tuneful bass
- versatile new PSU
- build quality

AGAINST

- occasional compression